

Right to Education in India: Law, Implementation, Challenges and the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the constitutional and statutory framework of the Right to Education (RTE) in India, evaluates major judicial pronouncements, reviews implementation outcomes, highlights core challenges (access, quality, equity, finance, and private public interactions), and proposes policy and legal reforms to better realize Article 21A in practice. Drawing on the RTE Act (2009), government rules and notifications, landmark Supreme Court judgments, and recent implementation reviews and status reports, the paper argues that while the RTE has been transformational in principle, gaps in finance, governance, monitoring, and learning outcomes require urgent corrective measures.

Keywords: Right to Education; Article 21A; RTE Act 2009; implementation; India; private schools; equity; NEP

1. Introduction

The Right to Education in India marks a fundamental shift: education for children became a fundamental right with the insertion of Article 21A by the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (commonly, the RTE Act) operationalized this constitutional guarantee by specifying duties, norms, and

entitlements for children aged 6–14. The Act set minimum norms for schools, defined responsibilities of governments and local authorities, and attempted to increase access and equity by including measures such as the 25% reservation for disadvantaged children in private schools. This paper analyzes the law, its judicial interpretation, and its lived outcomes across the Indian education system.

2. Objectives and Methodology

Objectives:

1. Map the legal framework and key provisions of RTE
2. Summarize major judicial decisions that shaped RTE's scope and limits
3. Evaluate implementation what has worked, what has not
4. Suggest reforms and policy solutions.

Methodology: Doctrinal analysis of constitutional provisions and statutes, combined with synthesis of government rules, official status reports and reputable NGO/think-tank studies and recent news reflecting implementation issues. Primary legal sources (RTE Act text and central rules) and landmark Supreme Court judgments were prioritized.

3. Legal and Policy Framework

3.1 Constitutional Basis: Article 21A (inserted by the 86th Amendment) makes the State's provision of free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children aged 6–14. The Directive Principles (Article 45) and other provisions provide complementary support for state responsibility in education.

3.2 RTE Act, 2009 Key Provisions: The RTE Act (2009) provides: Free and compulsory elementary education (6–14 years). Norms and standards for elementary schools (infrastructure, teacher-pupil ratios, teacher qualifications). Prohibition on capitation fees and screening procedures for admission.

Mandatory reservation of 25% seats in entry-level classes in all aided and unaided private schools (except unaided minority-run schools) for children from economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups; state reimbursement to schools. Duties on appropriate Governments, local authorities, and parents; regulatory oversight provisions.

3.3 Administrative Rules & Regulatory: Updates Central and state rules and notifications implement and refine RTE obligations. States maintain operational portals and MIS systems to manage admissions, reimbursements, and EWS allocations important mechanisms for practice and compliance.

4. Judicial Interpretation Landmark Cases

4.1 Society for Unaided Private Schools Association & Ors. v. Union of India (2012): In April 2012 the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act (the 25% reservation), subject to clarifications on implementation and safeguards. This decision cemented the state's power to mandate such reservations but also prompted debates over reimbursement mechanisms, screening/selection norms, and minority institution exceptions.

4.2 Pramati Educational & Cultural Trust v. Union of India (2014) and minority institution line: Subsequent judgments refined the interplay between RTE obligations and Article 30 protection of minority educational institutions' autonomy. Jurisprudence thus balances the right to education with minority institutional rights.

4.3 Other rulings (capitation fee, screening tests, admissions): The Supreme Court and various high courts have repeatedly condemned capitation fees and screening tests that contravene RTE spirit and have required government oversight to ensure open admissions and fairness.

5. Implementation: Gains and Gaps

5.1 Gains and Positive Outcomes Legal entitlement established: RTE created enforceable rights; awareness among parents has increased. Expanded access and infrastructure norms: The Act's norms pushed improvements in school infrastructure and teacher qualifications in many states. Private-school inclusion: The 25% reservation opened private-school seats for disadvantaged children, creating new cross-subsidy mechanisms and some integration.

5.2 Persistent Gaps Financing shortfalls: State funding to meet infrastructure, teacher recruitment and reimbursements to private schools is uneven; many states struggle to fully reimburse private schools for the 25% quota, creating tensions and compliance issues.

5.3 Learning outcomes remain weak: Many children complete elementary school without basic competency in reading and arithmetic a learning crisis that RTE alone has not solved.

5.4 Administrative capacity and monitoring: MIS and admission portals exist in many states, but compliance enforcement is inconsistent; news reports show state actions when schools fail to update EWS data illustrating implementation frictions.

5.5 Teacher shortage and quality: Teacher vacancies, poor in-service training, and weak teacher accountability hamper delivery.

5.6 Exclusions and alternative schooling models: Homeschooled children, migratory populations, and out-of-school children in remote/difficult contexts remain hard to reach.

6. Interface with National Policy (NEP 2020)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes foundational literacy and numeracy, early childhood care and education, and inclusive schooling objectives complementary to RTE. Coordination between RTE statutory norms and NEP programmatic priorities can strengthen basic learning outcomes, teacher professionalization, and early childhood integration. Implementation must ensure statutory protections are not eroded while pursuing NEP reforms.

7. Key Challenges

7.1 Fiscal sustainability & reimbursement mechanisms: The 25% quota requires predictable reimbursements to private schools. Delays and non-payment create resistance and sometimes legal pushback; sustained financing through clearly budgeted lines is essential.

7.2 Equity vs. Quality trade-offs: Ensuring seats for EWS students is a crucial equity win, but merely placing children in private schools without support (bridging, remedial teaching, cultural inclusion) may not improve learning.

7.3 Governance, monitoring and data: Robust, transparent MIS systems and grievance redressal mechanisms are required. Recent state actions show authorities are using these tools but also reveal friction and the need for better capacity-building.

7.4 Learning outcomes and teacher professional development: In-service training, pedagogical reforms, and assessment-focused support are necessary to improve foundational skills.

7.5 Special groups and inclusive education: Children with disabilities, migrant children, girls in underserved areas, and other vulnerable groups face multiple barriers: access, infrastructure (ramps, sanitation), and social inclusion.

8. Recommendations

Policy and Legal

1. Strengthen financing and accountability Create a dedicated, centrally backed matching fund for RTE reimbursements to ensure timely payments and predictable budgeting to private schools taking EWS students. Tie reimbursements to transparent MIS-based verification and third-party audits.
2. Improve learning outcomes Prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy programs aligned with NEP 2020 through targeted remedial interventions at primary levels. Scale teacher professional development programs with certification and career-path incentives.
3. Integrate early childhood care Operationalize pre-school provisions to ensure age-appropriate admissions and smoother primary entry, consistent with NEP emphasis on early years.
4. Strengthen inclusive provisions Mandate and fund reasonable accommodations (infrastructure and trained special educators) for children with disabilities. Strengthen monitoring for EWS quota filling ensure outreach, transport stipends where needed, and cultural sensitization training for private-school staff.
5. Improve grievance redress and enforcement Set up faster, state-level RTE grievance cells with time-bound resolution; deploy mobile/field outreach for out-of-school children and migratory populations.
6. Clarify legal tensions Use model rules and central-state coordination to clarify application of RTE to aided vs. unaided vs. minority institutions while protecting constitutional rights and ensuring access for disadvantaged children.

9. Conclusion

The RTE Act of 2009 is a landmark statute that made education a justiciable right for millions of Indian children. Statute, rules, and judiciary have created a legal architecture with important equity mechanisms such as the 25% reservation in private schools. Yet legal

entitlement alone is insufficient. The major policy challenge today is to translate statutory rights into quality, inclusive learning—through finance, governance, teacher capacity, and targeted interventions for the most marginalized. Strengthening monitoring, timely reimbursements, and aligning statutory implementation with NEP programmatic priorities will be key to ensuring Article 21A becomes a lived reality for every child.

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